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Comments on the proposed Hanford Cleanup Budget

Submitted by: Bob Cooper

For the record, I am objecting to the absence of the Department of Energy at this forum. I thought they were legally required to attend. And I do not understand how the state can presume to speak for the federal government unless there is some formal agreement delegating authority that I am not aware exists.

I am not a technical expert, but I am a native of the state of Washington and was formerly a reporter for media outlets in Seattle, Everett, Spokane, Pullman and the Portland-Vancouver markets.

The “cleanup” of Hanford is a story I was writing 30 years ago, and not much has changed. Yes, there’s been some incremental progress, but Hanford is still the most-contaminated place in the Western Hemisphere and the second most contaminated place on the face of the earth.

I think it was Albert Einstein who defined lunacy as doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result. That seems to be what we have at Hanford.

Contractors continue work without the stringent oversight needed to make sure they are spending my taxpayer-dollars efficiently and effectively. The same government agency – the Department of Energy and its predecessors – continue to supervise the treading-water work that fails to move cleanup forward in any significant way.

Specifically – and since I lack the technical expertise to comment on the engineering and construction details – I endorse the comments of the Hanford Advisory Board. Their consensus among disparate points of view should carry great weight in your budget decisions.

Additionally, there are three changes necessary to ensure success of the Hanford cleanup in a timely manner:

- 1) The “Get Well” plan recommended by Heart of America Northwest **MUST** be instituted for the vit plant as soon as possible.

- 2) Something must be done about project management – and not just a rearrangement of the deck chairs on the Titanic. New, aggressive oversight is necessary to achieve success.

It is obvious that current management cannot find a handle to guide the work successfully. A 275% increase in the cost of the vitrification project shows someone asleep at the switch.

There is abundant clarity that the Dept. of Energy is either incapable of supervising the work (which my charitable side prefers to think); or that D.O.E. suffers from Stockholm Syndrome and so sympathizes with the contractors' that it simply sides with them instead of looking out for my interests as a citizen and taxpayer (which is what my cynical side seems to think).

A separate agency needs to be in charge – managing contracts, supervising contractors, and doing the quality assurance work that is obviously absent.

- 3) The budget must be increased dramatically so that cleanup remains on time. As part of that increase, the budget should
 - a. Shift funding from construction of the vitrification plant to completing the engineering of the plant. Experts have told you that design-build – which could also be called “make-it-up-as-you-go-along” – is the wrong way to approach such a complex project. Boeing does not build airplanes before the whole design is complete – the Federal Aviation Administration does not let them do that – and the vitrification plant should not be built in such a manner, either.
 - b. Fully fund the Low Activity Waste plant so that it is built on-time, which will shave at least a decade off of the timeline to complete its work.
 - c. Start addressing materials buried at Hanford that you do not currently even plan to acknowledge (pre 1970 waste) – a key element of Initiative 297, which was endorsed by more than 1-point-8 million Washingtonians in 2004.

Yes, the initiative is currently tied up in court (which I will address in a moment), but the voice of the voters of this state should not be ignored. I am including the initiative here by reference as an official comment, and ask that a substantive response be provided to each and every one of the policies enunciated in it.

- d. Stop funding the Dept. of Justice and Hanford contractors to fight the will of Washington's voters. As I understand it, the Energy Dept. budget pays to challenge this state's voters and reimburses the contractors who are filing briefs to overturn the initiative. Why? What part of “Government of the People, by the People, and for the People” is not clear? It is not government's place to try to stomp its citizens' will – it is government's place to support it. And, last but not least
 - e. Provide adequate funding so that the Department of Ecology can hire the necessary experts and other staff to oversee cleanup. While the CBS News Magazine 60 Minutes made it abundantly clear that the Dept. of Energy is failing in its responsibilities to oversee cleanup, they neglected to point the spotlight on Ecology and its failure to demand compliance with the law that, among other things, should be

(along with the Dept. of Energy) prohibiting the addition of waste at Hanford under the Off Site Waste Rule.

In the end, I believe most of us want the same thing – to have the Hanford Nuclear Reservation cleaned up to the greatest extent possible. It is a federal responsibility to pay to clean up the mess it has made. There is an obligation that the Energy Department live up to that commitment and not try to slide by on a completely inadequate budget.

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